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THREE JEWISH FATHERS

GILBERT COSULICH
La Salle Extension University

“And she was his only child; beside her he had neither son nor daughter.”
—Judg. 11:34.

The Jew primarily suggests fatherhood. We like to think of him as the venerable patriarch extending his benedictory hands over the bowed heads of his reverent children. It is therefore interesting to compare, solely according to this standard, three of the most striking Israelites in our literature—Barabas, Shylock, and Isaac of York.

Since Shakespeare was influenced by Marlowe's creation, and Scott by Shakespeare's, it is not surprising to find that up to a certain point the domestic circumstances of these three usurers are identical. Each is a widower with one daughter; and in each case the daughter becomes enamored of a Christian. With these three elementary facts the parallel ends; and the divergences are perhaps sufficiently complex to warrant some analysis.

In passing judgment on the father, it may be well first to consider the attitude of the child.

For the cruelty of Barabas toward Abigail it is difficult to find justification. She is as dutiful as could be expected under the circumstances; the sole act of rebellion with which she can be charged is her sudden defection from the Jewish faith—one of the most improbable incidents of an improbable play. Yet even before she thus displeases him, and shortly after he has told us that he holds her as “dear as Agamemnon did his Iphigen,” he cold-bloodedly sells her happiness so that vengeance may be his:

He loves my daughter and she holds him dear;
But I have sworn to frustrate both their hopes,
And be revenged upon the governor.

Shylock turns against his daughter only on dire provocation; for Jessica is as deliberate in her treachery as Barabas himself.

Father and child react on each other: Shylock makes his home a "hell"; his daughter forsakes the hell; and Cerberus howls maledictions after her.

Between Isaac and Rebecca, the reaction is wholesome: the father, unlike Barabas, does not strike without cause; Rebecca, unlike Jessica, gives none. It is for his daughter's sake alone² that Isaac shows any of the "insolent self-assertion" of which he has been accused. She is the one bright ray in the old usurer's somber life: "Thou art a good damsel—a blessing, and a crown, and a song of rejoicing unto me and unto my house, and unto the people of my fathers." A Jewish father could say no more.

When the daughter-versus-ducat question is presented, it is interesting to note how each father decides.

That Abigail occupies second place in her father's heart is evident at the outset. As she throws down the bags to him he exclaims:

O my girl,
My gold, my fortune, my felicity!
Strength to my soul, death to mine enemy!
Welcome the first beginner of my bliss!

As an afterthought he adds:

O Abigail, Abigail, that I had thee here too!
Then my desires were fully satisfied.

Note the implication involved in the word "fully." A moment later comes that line so dear to the editors:

O girl! O gold! O beauty! O my bliss!

The stage direction is somewhat significant: "*Hugs the bags*"! The scale is tipped. Though still separated from Abigail, Barabas is consoled. "Gold" outweighs "girl."

Even more one-sided is the conflict in Shylock's bosom; for, instead of recovering his money-bags, Jessica robs him of them. It is only in a moment of despair that he is willing to bury them both: "I would that my daughter were dead at my foot, and the

² At the Ashby tournament, when he strives to secure for Rebecca a seat of vantage. The accusation referred to is found in an article entitled "Jews in English Fiction," *London Quarterly*, XXXVIII, 35; *Living Age*, CCXIV, 3.

jewels in her ear! would she were hearsed at my foot, and the ducats in her coffin." The entire dialogue with Tubal shows that Shylock is more incensed over the loss of his ducats than over his daughter's elopement with a Christian.

Isaac only once wavers between money-love and father-love. Scott tells us that during the bargaining with Prior Aymer for the release of Rebecca, the Jew's love for his worldly goods, "by dint of inveterate habit, contended even with his parental affection." A little later, Robin Hood has to rebuke him for his continued avarice. But his usual impulse is far different. He offers his entire fortune for his daughter's release from Torquilstone "in safety and in honor"; and when he receives news of Rebecca's grave peril at Templestowe, he cries out to his fellow-tribesman: "What would my gold avail me if the child of my love should perish?"

Another point of contrast is the attitude of each father toward the Christian in the case.

In his dealings with Abigail's lover, Barabas is moved, not by race pride, but by the spirit of revenge. Mathias is simply the tool that the Jew uses to destroy the son of an enemy. Not that Barabas is above race prejudice; he is probably below it. In the first scene, during the conversation with the other Jews, he shows himself entirely devoid of Hebrew clannishness when he says:

Nay, let them combat, conquer, and kill all!

(*Aside*) So they spare me, my daughter, and my wealth.

Although he despises Christian husbands along with other Christian institutions, Shylock's especial ire is directed against his daughter, rather than against the Gentile with whom she has fled: "My own flesh and blood to rebel!" And he remembers that it is she who has stolen his ducats and the turquoise he had of Leah.¹

What the Jew of York would think of Ivanhoe as a son-in-law we can only guess, since there is no occasion for his expressing an opinion. Although too good a disciple of the wise Miriam to let concealment feed on her damask cheek, Rebecca smiles at grief and never tells her love.

¹ A brief though spirited defense of Jessica may be found in the *Westminster Review*, CLXXI, 62-63.

Nothing in the conduct of the other two men, of course, can match the filicide committed by Barabas—an act done, not in parental wrath, but for the cowardly purpose of removing a possible accuser. Barabas is an unnatural father, and therefore an unnatural Jew.

Although Shylock bears a greater resemblance to the human species, his unceasing fulminations against Jessica show him to be a harsh and vindictive father.

Both Elizabethan characterizations are gross, catchpenny libels. It has remained for the Georgian novelist to give us a faithful picture of Jewish parenthood—a parenthood that has done so much to preserve a race of people whose persecutors, swifter than the eagles of the heaven, have pursued them upon the mountains and waylaid them in the wilderness.